

# Criminological Theories

*Introduction, Evaluation, and Application*



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## CHAPTER 1

# Introduction to Criminological Theory

### WHAT IS THEORY?

To many students, criminal justice practitioners, and other people, theory has a bad name. In their minds, the word *theory* means an irrelevant antonym of *fact*. Facts are real, whereas theories seem to involve no more than impractical mental gymnastics. Theories are just fanciful ideas that have little to do with what truly motivates real people. This is a mistaken image of theory in social science in general and criminology in particular. Theory, if developed properly, is about real situations, feelings, experience, and human behavior. An effective theory helps us to make sense of facts that we already know and can be tested against new facts. Theories are tentative answers to the commonly asked questions about events and behavior. Why? By what process? How does it work?

In general, [scientific theories] make statements about the relationships between observable phenomena. (Bernard, Snipes, and Gerould, 2010:4)

Theories, then, are really generalizations of a sort; they explain how two or more events are related to each other and the conditions under which the relationship takes place. (Williams and McShane, 2014:2)

A theory is a set of interconnected statements or propositions that explain how two or more events or factors are related to one another. (Curran and Renzetti, 2001:2)

Note that these and other definitions of theory (see Gibbs, 1990; Tibbetts and Hemmens, 2014) refer to statements about relationships between actual events—about what is and what will be. They are not answers to questions of what ought to be, nor are they philosophical, religious, or metaphysical systems of beliefs and values about crime and society (see the section on theory and ideology later).

Criminological theories are abstract, but they entail more than ivory-tower or armchair speculations. They are part of the broader social science endeavor to explain human behavior and society. Understanding why people conform to or deviate from social and legal norms is an integral part of a liberal education.

Moreover, such understanding is vital for those who plan to pursue specialized careers in the law or criminal justice. Virtually every policy or action taken regarding crime is based on some underlying theory or theories of crime. It is essential, therefore, to comprehend and evaluate the major theories of criminology, not only for the academic or research criminologist but also for the educated citizen and the legal or criminal justice professional.

## TYPES OF CRIMINOLOGICAL THEORIES

Edwin H. Sutherland (1947) defined *criminology* as the study of the entire process of lawmaking, lawbreaking, and law enforcing. This definition provides us with a starting point for classifying criminological theories. One such major type of theory addresses the first and third parts of this process: the making and enforcing of the law. Theories of this kind attempt to account for why we have the laws we have and why the criminal justice system operates the way it does. Another major type of theory explains lawbreaking. Such theories account for criminal and delinquent behavior. They are usually extended to explain any deviant behavior that violates social norms, whether or not such behavior also violates the law.

There are not as many different theories of the first kind (theories of law and criminal justice) as there are of the second kind (theories of criminal and deviant behavior). Therefore, although both are important, more attention is paid here to the second type of theory. Conflict, labeling, Marxist, and feminist theories are examples of theories that attempt to shed light on both criminal behavior and the law.

### Theories of Making and Enforcing Criminal Law

Theories of making and enforcing criminal law (also herein referred to as theories of law and criminal justice) offer answers to questions of how or why certain behavior and people become defined and are dealt with as criminal in society. Why is a particular conduct considered illegal, and what determines the kind of action to be taken when it occurs? How is it decided, and who makes the decision, that such conduct is criminal? And how are the resources of the public and state brought to bear against it? Theories try to answer these questions by proposing that social, political, and economic variables affect the legislation of law, administrative decisions and rules, and the implementation and operation of law in the criminal justice system.

### Theories of Criminal and Deviant Behavior

Theories of criminal and deviant behavior try to answer the question of why social and legal norms are violated. This question has two interrelated parts: (1) Why are there variations in group rates of crime and deviance, and (2) why are some individuals more likely than others to commit criminal and deviant acts?

The first question poses the problem of trying to make sense of the differences in the location and proportion of deviant and criminal behavior in various groups and societies. For example, why does the United States have a higher rate of crime than Japan but a lower rate than some European countries? Why do

males as a group commit so many more violent and criminal acts than females? How do we explain the differences in homicide and drug use among different classes and groups within the same society?

The second question raises the issue of explaining differences among individuals in committing or refraining from criminal acts. Why are some individuals more likely to break the law than others? By what process or under what circumstances do people typically, and not just in a specific, individual case, reach the point of obeying or violating the law? Why does one person commit a crime, given a certain opportunity, while another does not, given the same opportunity? Why are some people more likely than others to commit frequent crimes or pursue criminal careers?

The first set of questions focuses on societal and group patterns, the second on individual differences. A theory that addresses broader questions about differences across societies or major groups in society is called a **macro** theory. Conversely, one that focuses specifically on small-group or individual differences is considered a **micro** theory (Alexander et al., 1987). Other terms have also been used to make a similar distinction between theories. Cressey (1960) referred to “epidemiology” (the prevalence and distribution of crime across groups and societies) and “individual conduct.” Akers (1968, 1985) referred to such different theories as social structural and processual. These distinctions between macro and micro, structural and processual, refer not only to questions about groups and individual behavior but also to the kinds of answers a theory offers. For example, a theory that tries to answer the question of the differences between male and female crime rates by relying on innate biological differences between men and women would still be operating on the micro level.

In actuality, the two major questions of group and individual behavior are really just subtypes of the same general question: why people do or do not commit crime and deviance.

The dependent variable in macro-level theories is based ultimately on the same behavior that is the dependent variable in micro-level theories. Social structure and crime rates are embodied in the actions and reactions of real people. Crime rates are summary statements of relative amounts of individual behavior in different groups or social categories (Akers, 1998:330).

This is why theories of criminal behavior are neither strictly structural nor processual, although each emphasizes one or the other. Theories emphasizing social structure propose that the proportion of crimes among groups, classes, communities, or societies differ because of variations in their social or cultural makeup. Most structural theories, however, also include implicit or explicit statements regarding the process by which these structural conditions produce high or low crime rates. Processual theories assert that an individual commits criminal acts because he or she has experienced a particular life history, possessed a particular set of individual characteristics, or encountered a particular situation. Such theories also consider the deviancy-producing structures that an individual must encounter to increase the probability of his or her committing a crime.

#### 4 CRIMINOLOGICAL THEORIES

There are other ways to classify criminological theories (e.g., see Tittle and Paternoster, 2000; Bernard and Engel, 2001; Jennings and Reingle, 2014). One common way is to refer not just to micro or macro but to several levels of explanation that ascend from the smallest to the largest unit of analysis. Such a classification typically categorizes the theories according to the general scientific discipline from which the explanatory variables are drawn. The most common classifications are biological theories that explain crime with one or more genetic, chemical, neurological, or physiological variables; psychological theories based on personality, emotional maladjustment, psychic disturbance, or psychological traits; social psychological theories that account for crime by reference to behavior, self, and cognitive variables in a group context; and sociological theories that explain crime with cultural, structural, and sociodemographic variables (see Jensen and Rojek, 1998; Bernard et al., 2010; Liska and Messner, 1999; Robinson and Beaver, 2009; Berg et al., 2012a, 2012b).

Just as the categories of structure and process overlap to some extent, some theories will draw from two or more disciplines. For instance, contemporary bio-social theories do not rely exclusively on genetic or biochemical factors but also draw from psychological or sociological variables as well. Other theories, such as social learning, are clearly social-psychological, utilizing both sociological and psychological variables.

The theories are arranged in the following chapters in an order that draws roughly from both the structure-process distinction and the classification of theories as biological, psychological, and sociological. Chapter 2 introduces the classical and contemporary statements of deterrence theory and rational choice theory. Chapter 3 surveys early and recent biological theories. Psychological theories are surveyed in Chapter 4. The remaining chapters review the major sociological theories of crime. Social learning theory (Chapter 5), control theories (Chapter 6), and labeling theory (Chapter 7) are the more social-psychologically oriented of these sociological theories. Chapter 8 (social disorganization theory), Chapter 9 (anomie and strain theories), Chapter 10 (conflict theory), Chapter 11 (Marxist theories), Chapter 12 (critical theories), and Chapter 13 (feminist theories) discuss those theories that draw the most heavily from social structure and culture. Labeling, conflict, Marxist, and feminist perspectives are theories both of criminal justice and criminal behavior. Developmental and life-course theories are reviewed in Chapter 14. The final chapter (Chapter 15) examines the extent to which the differences and commonalities in theories can be reconciled and integrated. Whatever the classification of theory used, there will be some kind of overlap, shortcomings, and loose ends. No special case is made here for the order in which the various theories are presented, as the focus is not on how best to classify each theory but rather on introducing what each theory proposes and evaluating its validity.

#### CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING THEORY

How do we know if a theory offers a sound explanation of crime or criminal justice? Commonalities across theories can be found, but the various theories

explored here provide different, sometimes contradictory, explanations of crime. How do we judge which explanation is preferable over another or which is the best among several theories?

If criminological theories are to be scientific, then they must be judged by scientific criteria. The most important of these is empirical validity—the extent to which a theory can be verified or refuted with carefully gathered evidence. However, there are several other major criteria by which theories can be assessed. These include internal logical consistency, scope and parsimony, testability, and usefulness and policy implication. (For discussions of the criteria for evaluating criminological theories, see Gibbons, 1994; Barlow and Ferdinand, 1992; Tittle, 1995; Kubrin, Stucky, and Krohn, 2009; Bernard et al., 2010; Lilly et al., 2014.)

### Logical Consistency, Scope, and Parsimony

The basic prerequisite for a sound theory is that it has clearly defined concepts and that its propositions are logically stated and **internally consistent** (Budziszewski, 1997). For example, a theory that proposes that criminals are biologically deficient and that deficiency explains their criminal behavior cannot also claim that family socialization is the basic cause of criminal behavior.

The **scope** of a theory refers to the range of phenomena that it proposes to explain. For instance, a theory that accounts only for the crime of check forgery may be accurate, but it is obviously very limited in scope. A better theory is one that accounts for a wide range of offenses, including check forgery. A theory of juvenile delinquency that does not relate as well to adult criminality is more restricted than one that accounts for both juvenile delinquency and adult crime. A theory that explains only the age distribution of crime has a more limited scope than one that explains the age, race, sex, and class distributions of crime.

**Parsimony**, the conciseness and abstractness of a set of concepts and propositions, is also a desirable characteristic in a scientific theory. Scope and parsimony are interrelated in that a theory that explains a wide scope of events with a few succinct statements is scientifically preferable to one that relies on a complex set of propositions and variables that accounts for only a small range of events. The principle of parsimony is to use as few concepts and propositions as possible to explain the widest range of phenomena. For example, a theory that proposes that all crime and delinquency is caused by low self-control is much more parsimonious than a theory that requires a different set of multiple hypotheses to explain crime and delinquency, depending on the type of offense and the age, sex, or race of the offender or on a myriad of factors and their interaction across multiple units of analysis (for further discussion, see Lynch et al., 2013).

### Testability

A scientific theory must be testable by objective, repeatable evidence. If a theory cannot be tested against empirical findings, it has no scientific value. It is not enough for a theory to fit known facts about crime or empirical evidence consistent with its propositions. It must also be possible to subject the theory to

**empirical falsification**; in other words, it must be open to evidence that may counter or disprove its hypotheses with negative findings. If it is not falsifiable in this sense, it is not testable (Stinchcombe, 1968).

A theory may be untestable because the definitions of its concepts and its propositions are stated as a tautology. A **tautology** is a statement or hypothesis that is true by definition or involves circular reasoning (Budziszewski, 1997). If, for example, one begins with the definition of low self-control as the failure to refrain from crime and then proposes low self-control as a cause of law violation, then one's proposition is tautological. Given the definition of low self-control, the proposition can never be proven false because self-control is defined by the very thing it is hypothesized to explain. It simply says that a person who has low self-control has low self-control, or that a person who violates the law violates the law. A variation on a tautology that is true by definition is seen in the practice of placing a label on some behavior then using that label to explain the same behavior. For instance, one may label serial killers as psychopaths, then assert that people commit serial murders because they are psychopathic. Such a statement does no more than repeat the label. Similarly, we may observe that a person drinks excessively and has problems with alcohol, so we theorize that the person overdrinks because he is an alcoholic. How do we know he is an alcoholic? We know because he drinks excessively and has problems with alcohol. We have come full circle.

Another way in which a theory may be untestable is that its propositions are so open-ended that any contradictory empirical evidence can be interpreted or reinterpreted to support the theory. For example, a theory may propose that males who rob banks are motivated by an irrational and unconscious impulse to resolve their guilt over their childhood sexual attraction toward their own mothers. This is a testable explanation of male bank robbery because it is not true by definition. If research finds enough bank robbers who fit this description, then the theory is supported. If research uncovers other cases where bank robbers claim their only motive is money and they have no such feelings toward their mothers, then that can be taken as falsifying the theory. However, the theory cannot be falsified if the claims of the latter bank robbers are dismissed by asserting that their very denial of these feelings in effect supports the theory because the same unconscious impulse that motivated them to rob banks also rendered them unconscious of their true motivations. Similarly, a theory may contend that criminal laws always serve the interests of the ruling capitalist elite. Even if laws are enacted to serve the interest of the working class, one could always reinterpret them with the argument that such laws only appear to serve the working class but in fact serve the ruling class. There is no way to falsify the theory. Hence a theory that can never be proven wrong, regardless of the findings, is not a testable theory.

A theory may also be untestable because its concepts are not measurable by observable and reportable events. A theory's concepts and propositions identify the explanatory events or independent variables that account for variations in the dependent variables, which are events or behavior to be explained. Even a non-tautological theory cannot be tested if it is not possible to find observable

events that can be taken as objective and repeatable measures of these concepts. Without such measures, the hypothesized relationships cannot be checked against actual events. If a theory proposes that people commit crimes because they are possessed by invisible demons, there is no way to prove whether such demons are responsible for the crime. If we cannot measure the existence of demons separately from the occurrence of criminal behavior, we may simply assume the existence of the demons from the existence of the crimes. We have a similar tautology if the dependent and independent variables are measured by the same events. For example, it is tautological to explain a high rate of delinquency as the result of social disorganization if one of the indicators of social disorganization is the delinquency rate itself. Both the events to be explained and the events used to explain them are the same thing. It is tautological to interpret an event as the cause of itself.

Not all concepts must be directly measurable for a theory to be testable, but one must be able to relate them in a logical and clear way to measurable phenomena. For instance, one part of social learning theory proposes that an individual's exposure to admired models who are involved in deviant or delinquent behavior will increase the chances that the individual will imitate those same behaviors. "Imitation" is defined as one engaging in acts after he or she has watched them being engaged in by others. It is quite possible to directly observe the behavior of adult or peer models whom adolescents are in a position to imitate, or to ask adolescents to report exposure to such models and then observe the extent to which their behavior matches that of the models. The concept of imitation refers to observable, measurable events; therefore, propositions about modeling are testable.

### **Empirical Validity**

**Empirical validity** is the most important criterion for judging a theory, and it simply means that a theory has been supported by research evidence. For a theory to be logical, parsimonious, and non-tautological means little if it turns out to be false. It is seldom the case, however, that a theory is found to be entirely true or entirely false. Falsifiable theories may encounter some negative evidence without being judged as wholly invalid. The question is: What degree of empirical support does the theory have? Do the findings of research provide weak or strong support? Does the preponderance of evidence support or undermine the theory? How does its empirical validity compare with that of other theories?

For instance, deterrence theory proposes in part that offenders will not repeat their crimes if they have been caught and given severe legal punishment. If research finds that this is true for only a small minority of offenders or that punished offenders are only slightly less likely to repeat crimes than unpunished offenders, then the theory has some, but not much, empirical validity. Labeling theory, on the other hand, proposes that the experience of being caught and processed by the criminal justice system labels offenders as criminal. This application of a stigmatizing label is hypothesized to promote their self-identity as criminals and makes them more likely, rather than less likely, to repeat their crimes. If research finds that, other things being equal, apprehended offenders

are more likely to recidivate than those who have not been caught, then labeling theory has more empirical validity than deterrence theory.

### ***Concepts of Causality and Determinism***

Notice the terms *more likely* and *less likely*. Empirical validity does not mean that a theory must identify variables that *always* cause criminal behavior to occur or *always* explain the decision to arrest an offender. The **traditional concept of causality** in science is that cause X must precede and produce effect Y. To be a cause, X must be both a **necessary condition**, the absence of which means that Y will not occur, and a **sufficient condition**, so that Y always occurs in the presence of X. No criminological theory can meet these two traditional causation criteria of necessary and sufficient conditions. But that makes little difference because a **probabilistic concept of causality** is more appropriate for assessing the empirical validity of criminological theories. The probabilistic concept of causation simply asserts that the presence of X renders the occurrence of Y more probable; that is, contemporaneous variations or changes in criminal behavior are associated or correlated with variations or changes in the explanatory variables identified in the theory. The presence of the variables specified in the theory precedes the occurrence of crime and delinquency, thereby predicting when they are more likely to occur or reoccur. The stronger the correlations and associations, the greater the theory's empirical validity.

Interpreting correlations as causation even in the probabilistic sense remains a problem because the direction of the relationship between two correlated variables may not be the same as specified in the theory. For instance, a theory may hypothesize that an adolescent engages in delinquent conduct as a result of associating with other adolescents who are already delinquent. Finding a correlation between one's own delinquent behavior and the delinquency of one's friends, therefore, could be taken as evidence in support of the theory. But the relationship may exist for converse reasons; that is, the adolescent first becomes delinquent and then seeks out delinquent associates. Thus the association with other delinquents may be the dependent variable, resulting from one's own prior delinquency, rather than the independent variable that increases the probability that the adolescent will commit delinquency. Further research would be needed to find out in which direction the relationship typically runs.

The probabilistic concept of causality suggests that human behavior is neither completely determined by external forces nor completely an outcome of the unfettered exercise of free-will choices. Rather, behavior is best understood from the middle-ground perspective of "soft determinism" (Matza, 1964). **Soft determinism** allows for human agency and recognizes that various factors influence and limit actions but leave room for individual choices that cannot be completely predicted. Increasingly, criminological theorists have come to adopt this view (Gibbons, 1994; Akers, 1998; Walsh, 2002; Lilly et al., 2014):

Numerous theorists, however, have come to advance similar arguments in recent years. Versions of soft determinism or indeterminism are now advocated by

control theorists, rational choice theorists, social learning theorists, conflict theorists, and others. . . . [P]eople may transcend previous experience through reflective thought, altering their preferences and developing unexpected and sometimes novel strategies for acting on those preferences. (Agnew, 1995b:83, 88)

### ***Quality of Empirical Tests of Theory***

Not all empirical tests of theories are of equal methodological quality. The better studies do a good job of measuring the variables derived from the theory (or theories) being tested, correctly specify the hypotheses about the relationships expected or predicted by the theory, measure all of the main concepts, use more than one measure of each concept, and use measures that correctly and reliably reflect the meaning of the concepts in the theory (Carmines and Zeller, 1979; Kubrin, Stucky, and Krohn, 2009). Such studies test the direct effect of the factors hypothesized by the theory to explain criminal behavior. But they also test, where appropriate, for indirect or interaction effects—that is, they examine how much the independent variables affect the dependent variables when other factors are controlled or taken into account. For example, self-control theory proposes that those lower in self-control are more likely to commit crime when the opportunity for crime is high than when opportunity is low. The outcome of a study that allows for the interaction between self-control and opportunity (by testing the effects of low self-control, taking into account the relative presence or absence of opportunities) carries greater weight than the outcome of a study that models only the combined effects of self-control and opportunity or ignores the effect of opportunity altogether. Other issues related to the quality of empirical tests include whether or not the appropriate causal order and the linear or nonlinear shape of the relationships specified in the theory have been carefully examined.

Further, the research should be done with well-selected samples of subjects, respondents, or informants to which the theory applies. For instance, a sample of lower-class urban boys is appropriate, whereas a sample of adults would be inappropriate, for testing a theory that hypothesizes the existence of an urban delinquent subculture among lower-class male adolescents. Similarly, good studies use the proper unit of analysis, that is, individuals or small groups for micro level theories and communities, nations, or societies for macro-level theories.

### ***Usefulness and Policy Implications***

Finally, the value of a criminological theory can be further evaluated by its usefulness in providing guidelines for effective social and criminal justice policy and practice (Nagin and Weisburd, 2013; Sampson et al., 2013; Tonry, 2013). Every criminological theory implies a therapy or a policy. The basic assumption in theory-guided practice is that the better the theory explains the problem, the better it is able to guide efforts to solve the problem.

All major criminological theories have implications for, and have indeed been utilized in, criminal justice policy and practice. Every therapy, treatment program, prison regimen, police policy, or criminal justice practice is based,

either explicitly or implicitly, on some explanation of human nature in general or criminal behavior in particular (Barlow, 1995; Gibbs, 1995; Akers and Jennings, 2009). Every recommendation for changes in our legal and criminal justice system has been based on some underlying theory that explains why the laws have been enacted, why the system operates as it does, and why those who are in the system behave as they do.

The question, then, is not whether policy can be or should be based on theory—it already is guided by theory—but rather, how well is policy guided by theory, and how good is the policy and the theory on which it is predicated? In most public discourse about criminal justice policy, the underlying theoretical notions are ill-stated and vaguely understood. A policy may be adopted for political, economic, or bureaucratic reasons; then a theoretical rationale is formulated or adopted to justify it. Typically, the theoretical underpinnings of a program are not a single coherent and tested theory but rather a hybrid mixture of several, sometimes conflicting, theoretical strands (Wright and Dixon, 1978). This understandably results from the effort to try any number of things to see what works. Utility and effectiveness, not theoretical purity, are the standard in policy and practical application.

Criminological theory has implications not only for official public policy and programs but also for what can be done informally in families, peer groups, neighborhoods, and communities. From a sociological perspective, this informal control system embedded in everyday life and interaction has more impact on behavior than formal criminal justice policy (Felson and Eckert, 2016). Of course, there is an interdependence of formal and informal actions and activities to combat crime and delinquency. In either case, the policy should not rest solely on its theoretical or philosophical plausibility or simply conform to common sense. Just as theories must be shown empirically to be valid, policy and practice must be shown empirically to work and produce the outcomes they are intended to have (prevention, control, or reduction of crime and delinquency). They must also meet ethical, legal, and moral standards of fairness, equity, due process, and appropriateness for a democratic society (Akers, 2005).

A clear, parsimonious, non-tautological, and empirically valid theory has even more to recommend if it can also guide programs and practices. If a program guided by that theory is instituted and is successful in achieving its goals, we gain additional confidence in the validity of the theory. Evaluation research is often conducted to assess the degree to which a program achieves its goals. However, like empirical tests of theory, not all evaluations are of equal quality. **Outcome evaluations** that utilize experimental designs, with both pre- and post-intervention measures, and random assignment of subjects to treatment (experimental) and control conditions offer the most credible results. However, evaluations to verify a program's effectiveness, no matter how rigorous the design, may still produce an incomplete assessment of the program or policy. A **process evaluation** may also be done to see if the program has indeed been implemented in the proper manner and with the proper participants as specified by the theory and goals underlying the program. The program itself may be a poor

adaptation of the theory's guiding principles. There may be practical or ethical roadblocks against carrying out the actions that the theory implies are needed to change criminal behavior, reduce recidivism, or make the system operate better.

The policy and program implications of some biological theories that involve chemical or surgical intrusion into a person's body are often seen as most objectionable and as involving the most severe ethical, moral, and constitutional problems. But the ethical, legal, and moral issues of fairness, equity, due process, and appropriateness are not qualitatively different from those faced by policy derived from any other theoretical perspective (Akers, 2005).

There may be political or economic factors that come into play to enhance or retard the effectiveness of the program that have nothing to do with the validity of the theory. Therefore, the success or failure of policies and programs cannot be used by themselves to test theory. This does not mean such outcomes are irrelevant to theory development and modification:

The phrase "nothing is as practical as a good theory" is a twist of an older truth: Nothing improves theory more than its confrontation with practice. It is my belief that the development of applied social theory will do much good to basic theoretical sociology. This is obvious enough as we deal with those parts of theoretical sociology that are put to practical use; they become refined in the process. (Zetterberg, 1962:189)

### Theory and Ideology

A theory to explain the existing operation of the criminal justice system is not the same as a judgment about what kind of legal system we should have. It is not a theoretical statement, for instance, to argue that we should have a fair, just, and effective criminal justice system. Such a statement offers desirable social goals about which the vast majority of citizens may agree. Other statements, such as the desirability of completely disarming the civilian population, generate controversy. But neither provides a scientific explanation of law and criminal justice. Arguments over the goals and purposes of the system—such as whether it should focus on crime control to protect society rather than due process to protect the rights of the accused or whether it should simply punish law violators as their just deserts or should attempt to rehabilitate them—constitute an **ideology** and are not theoretical arguments. Ideology in the form of philosophical and pragmatic debates over society's control of crime may be informed by theory and have relevance to the application of theory, but they are not themselves theoretical explanations of why laws are formulated and enforced or why people commit crimes (see Tonry, 2013). Theories attempt to explain the behavior of the participants in the legal system and the operation of the system itself. They produce hypotheses about the factors that account for legal and criminal justice actions and decisions. Theories do not specify what are the correct, proper, and desirable values that should be exemplified in the system. Theories account for criminal behavior. They do not tell us what should or should not be considered criminal.

This is not to imply that those who are proponents of a particular theory are unaffected by their philosophical and value judgments. There is a relationship between theories of crime and criminal justice and philosophies that define the goals of a just, effective, and well-managed criminal justice system. Such goals partially direct which theories will be considered to be important, and those theories will help to develop strategies to reach these goals.

For example, one of the reasons that conflict theory is important in criminology is that its theoretical propositions about the operation of the system are relevant to the political and moral debates over the justness of that system. The goal of a just system is to treat everyone equitably based on legally relevant factors such as the nature of the criminal act and the laws relating to it. Conflict theory (see Chapter 10) hypothesizes that actions taken in the criminal justice system may be decided differentially based on such factors as the race, class, and gender of offenders rather than on the type of crime. The decisions of a criminal justice system that relies more on such social characteristics than on the nature of the crime is not a just system. Therefore, the extent to which conflict theory is supported or refuted by research evidence is critical to the debate over the fairness of the criminal justice system.

Further, one's political, social, religious, or other philosophical leanings may influence preferences for different theoretical perspectives or vice versa. As an example of this, Cooper, Walsh, and Ellis (2010) surveyed criminologists at a national conference on their political ideologies, the theories they favored, and which conditions or factors they considered to be important causes of crime. The findings (based on a low response rate) showed that most academic criminologists consider themselves to be politically liberal (60%) or moderate (27%), but some identify themselves as conservatives (5%) or radicals (8%). Not surprising, this last group favored Marxist, radical, and critical (see Chapter 11 and Chapter 12) or conflict theories (see Chapter 10). Criminologists who identify themselves as politically conservative tend to favor biosocial (see Chapter 3), self-control (see Chapter 6), and developmental and life-course theories (see Chapter 14). Political moderates tend to favor social learning theory (see Chapter 5), whereas liberals endorse social disorganization theory (see Chapter 8) and social control theory (see Chapter 6) as well as social learning theory. Thus, among this group of criminologists, one's theoretical stance is somewhat related to one's political philosophy. But the two are separable and incompletely related, as shown by the finding that social learning theory is endorsed by conservatives, moderates, liberals, and radicals alike. Moreover, there are certain key theoretical issues over which there is little disagreement regardless of one's political ideology; these issues include peer influences, unstable family life, alcohol abuse, and "hard" drugs as causes of offending (Cooper et al., 2010:340).

The adequacy of a theory cannot be properly judged by the political or partisan ideologies of its proponents. Valid explanations of crime and criminal justice may be used for liberal, conservative, or radical policies. The weakest reason for

accepting or rejecting a theory of crime or criminal justice is how well it conforms to or defies one's own beliefs, ideologies, or preferred policies.

### **Emphasis on Empirical Validity and Application of Theories**

The primary criterion for judging a theory is its verification or refutation by empirical research (Gibbs, 1990), and this is emphasized in each of the following chapters. The policy implications and applications of theories are also important and are highlighted. Reference is made, where appropriate, to other criteria for evaluating criminological theories. But the emphasis in this book is on the following: (1) introducing the central concepts and propositions of criminological theories, (2) evaluating their empirical validity, and (3) assessing their application to policies and programs.

## **SUMMARY**

Criminological theories are both theories of the making and enforcing of criminal law and theories of breaking the law. The former attempts to explain the content of the laws and the behavior of the criminal justice system; the latter tries to explain the commission, occurrence, and patterns of criminal and deviant behavior. Such theories best fit assumptions of probabilistic or soft determinism rather than strict determinism. Structural or macro theories focus on differences in group and societal rates of crime, whereas processual or micro theories address individual differences and social processes. The aim of criminological theory is to gain an understanding of crime and criminal justice. Theories are useful for addressing the issues of which policies are more or less likely to work, but they are not philosophical statements about what ought to be done. A theory may be evaluated, either on its own or by comparison with other theories, on the criteria of clarity and consistency, scope and parsimony, testability, practical usefulness, and empirical validity. Of these, the focus here is on a theory's empirical validity and its usefulness for guiding policy and practice.

## **KEY WORDS**

macro	tautology	soft determinism
micro	empirical validity	outcome evaluation
internally consistent	traditional causality	process evaluation
scope	necessary condition	ideology
parsimony	sufficient condition	
empirical falsification	probabilistic causality	